



The Leap Frogs-Origins of the Navy SEAL Parachuting Exhibition Team

By the Founder of the Leap Frogs: Captain (SEAL) N.H. Olson, USN, Retired

Freefall Parachuting, also referred to as Sky Diving or Sport Parachuting, is the art of exiting from an aircraft at a high altitude, stabilizing the body during a delayed fall, executing various maneuvers, safely opening the parachute at a given time over a given ground reference point and guiding the parachute so as to land on a specific target. With today's technology, training and expertise, this art form has exceeded the wildest expectations of those UDT SEAL pioneers of the U.S. Navy Parachute Team, and no one does it better than today's "Leap Frogs."

Over sixty years ago, freefall parachuting started to come into its own and our Frogmen were into the middle of it. In 1956, after graduating with the first UDT Detachment to attend Basic Airborne Training, a quiet professional from UDT TWENTY-ONE, MN1 (later LCDR) Jim McGee, ordered a main and reserve parachute from an ad in *Mechanics Illustrated* and commenced making freefall jumps from his two seated Aeronca Chief. He and his UDT pilot buddy, LTJG Bruce Welch, alternated flying the plane and jumping from it using his newly acquired parachute assembly. When word got out in the Teams about this newfound joy, there was a run on NAS Salvage to pickup anything that resembled a parachute.

Harnesses, B 11 back packs, QAC chest packs and 28 Ft orange and white canopies were procured and assembled, and carpenters coveralls, football helmets, motorcycle goggles, gloves and stop watches were purchased to round out the ensemble. Other names from UDT TWENTY-ONE and UDT TWENTY-TWO, like Boitnott, Gallagher, Heinlein, Janecka, Moncrief, Tipton, Waugh, Williams and Wilson comprised the nucleus of what was to become the South Norfolk Parachute Club. Contact in the air was normally not by design, opening shocks without deployment sleeves were something to behold, and directional control of unmodified canopies was totally dependent upon wind direction and speed. Sometimes two harnesses had to be worn; one for the chest mounted reserve and the other for the main parachute. Dying of canopies, without consideration for the damage it was doing to the fabric, was also a way of personalizing one's chute.

The Club became affiliated with the Parachute Club of America (PCA), now the United States Parachute Association (USPA), and many of its members acquired Class D License Ratings, which required a minimum of 200 freefall jumps of varying degrees of difficulty. The license numbering system is chronological and tells its own story: Waugh (D 128), Janecka (D-460), Moncrief (D 519) and Heinlein (D 708). As of 2013, the last "D" License to be issued by the USPA exceeded 33,000.

In the late 50's, more information on equipment and techniques became available from the PCA, but more importantly, a personal relationship was established in 1959 with the newly formed

XVIII Airborne Corps "Strategic Army Corps Parachute Team." In June 1961, it was formerly designated as the "Golden Knights." They were truly the test bed of modern sport parachuting, and when they spoke, people listened, including the PCA. Amongst other things, they taught the UDTs how to modify parachutes and introduced them to the wonders of the canopy deployment sleeve.

In 1961, the U.S. Navy Parachute Exhibition Team, "Chuting Stars" was formed to help celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Naval Aviation. The Parachutists assigned to the original team were selected from the Navy Test Parachute Unit, NAF, El Centro, CA. Their success led to permanent status and a move to NAS, Pensacola for the 1962 to 1964 air show seasons. The team was also expanded and included personnel from other ratings. However, midway through the 1964 season, the "Chuting Stars" became the victim of budget cuts and their operation was discontinued.

Two years later, the Chief of Naval Operations authorized a Navy Parachute Team to be based at NATTC, Lakehurst, NJ. A full schedule of demonstration and competition parachuting events were maintained into 1969, when authorization was granted to reactivate the "Chuting Stars" designation as the official U.S. Navy Parachute Team. In 1971, following a successful season, the same fate of budget cuts that discontinued the previous "Chuting Stars" grounded the current team for the final time.

When the original team opened the opportunity for others to apply for parachute duty with the "Chuting Stars", several of the aforementioned Navy Frogmen requested this assignment, but only Frank Moncrief of UDT TWENTY-TWO was selected. He remained with the Team through the first show season; however, when SEAL Team TWO was established in 1962, he was anxious to get back and join his SEAL Teammates.

By then the SEALs were the first Navy personnel to hone their freefall parachuting skills at the Army's High Altitude, Low Opening (HALO) School, Ft. Bragg, NC.

On an individual basis, Stan Janecka went on to garner national prominence as a world class champion in style and accuracy parachuting. During this same time frame, PHC Gene "Gag" Gagliardi (D 546) of UDT ELEVEN had gained considerable HALO and Sport Parachuting experience in Southern California, which had then become a hotbed for Skydiving.

When LCDR Norm Olson, one of the early East Coast jumpers, reported as Commanding Officer, UDT ELEVEN, Chief Gagliardi introduced him to the local jumping elite. He immediately got caught up in the euphoria of their advanced expertise and slowly became accepted as a mainstay in the San Diego Skydivers, one of the nation's first sports parachuting clubs.

Subsequently, at the goading of Chief Gagliardi, LCDR Olson recommended to his boss, Commander Naval Operations Support Group, PACIFIC that consideration be given to creating a small demonstration team comprised of a cadre of highly qualified freefall jumpers.

Its activities were to be conducted on a "not to interfere" basis with other military duties and at no cost to the government, other than utilizing normally scheduled aircraft. The Teams initial purpose was to visually enhance the many local UDT SEAL Demonstrations, both on base and off. The concept was approved in January 1964 and met with immediate success, not only in helping to tell the UDT SEAL story but that of the Navy. As time went on, the UDT Para-Team's reputation gained popularity and requests for locally sponsored weekend demonstrations spread throughout California and Arizona.

At the outset, personally owned parachutes and equipment were utilized, which provided little uniformity, no matter how well the jumps were executed. To overcome this dilemma and still remain within the "no cost to the government" provision, unique procurement techniques were

employed. Innovation being the mother of invention, known only too well by the Teams of that era, produced Pioneer Jumpsuits, Bell Helmets, French Jump Boots, Altimeters and Para-Commander Parachutes, the most radical change in parachute design in thirty five years. The Team initially consisted of five jumpers: LCDR Olson, PHC Gagliardi, SK2 "Herky" Hertenstein, PR1 Al Schimiz and PH2 "Chip" Maury. Schimiz and Maury were members of the original "Chuting Stars."

Over the next decade, the West Coast "Para Team" grew in size and adopted the name "Leap Frogs." With this growth came more professionalism and national recognition as a group of jumpers to be reckoned with.

Subsequently, in 1969, under the leadership of LT "Scotty" Lyon, the Team was officially designated by the Navy Recruiting Command as the Navy Parachute Team (NPT). While the West Coast was on the leading edge of military demonstration jumping, the East Coast had not progressed significantly in this regard, even though they had established a very active military sport parachuting club at NAS, Oceana.

When now CDR Olson was reassigned to the Atlantic Fleet in 1968, he again convinced his boss, Commander Naval Special Warfare Group, ATLANTIC, to establish a demonstration team similar to the one in the Pacific. For the next several years, the UDT SEAL Para Team ATLANTIC put on demonstrations throughout the East Coast, but the big break came in 1973 during the Annual Azalea Day Festival Air Show at NAS, Norfolk. Historically, this had been a Blue Angels/Golden Knights show; however, that year the Army had a scheduling conflict and had to renege. Being opportunists, the Para Team invited itself to the dance and put on a superb demonstration.

Fortuitously, RADM F.H. Miller, Commander Naval Recruiting Command was in attendance and expressed his pleasure to RADM W.M.A. Greene, Commander Naval Inshore Warfare Command, ATLANTIC. Several weeks later, now CAPT Olson had a personal audience with RADM Miller, who bought off on combining and supporting both demonstration teams under the Navy Parachute Team umbrella.

The NPT (West) continued to retain "Leap Frogs" as their name, and the NPT (East) adopted "Chuting Stars" as theirs. For the next dozen years, the Mississippi served as the dividing line for demonstrations scheduled by the Naval Recruiting Command. Initially there was little contact between both Teams, but as time progressed, annual joint training evolved, All Navy and All Military freefall records were jointly established, and selected personnel from both Teams participated in Military and National Competition. In the mid 80's, due to funding constraints and operational tempo, the "Chuting Stars" were disbanded and the "Leap Frogs" assumed responsibility for all official parachute demonstrations within the Navy.

Up until 1994, this thirty-year history of Naval Special Warfare's involvement with the Navy Parachute Team had literally been a series of ups and downs, primarily due to limited command support and the temporary nature of personnel assignments. However, over the past decade, its capability was finally accepted and institutionalized as a permanent organization within the Naval Special Warfare Command.

The Chief of Naval Operations assigned the "Leap Frogs" the mission of demonstrating Navy excellence throughout the United States by supporting Navy recruiting efforts and promoting the Naval Special Warfare community to the American public.

Today's U.S. Navy Parachute Team is comprised of fifteen Navy SEALs, SWCCs, and Parachute Riggers assigned to Naval Special Warfare. Each member is a volunteer and assigned for a three-year tour. They are drawn from the Naval Special Warfare Groups located

on the east and west coasts. On completion of their tour, members return to operational Sea, Air, Land Teams or Special Boat Squadrons.

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His U.S. Parachute Association (USPA) Membership Number 307 was issued in 1963, and he holds USPA Licenses C 1998 and D 1062. When he retired from the Navy in 1983, he held USPA Diamond Wings Number 338 (2,000 freefall jumps) and Diamond Freefall Wings Number 101 (twenty-four hours freefall time). Additionally, he held USPA Jumpmaster, Rigger and Instructor Ratings.

21-years after he retired from the Navy, he returned to skydiving, and in 6-years made 1,800 jumps, making his 4,000 freefall on his 80th birthday. He also accumulated 60-hours in freefall and was inducted into the Jumpers Over Eighty Society (JOES). During this 6-year period, he participated on several world record formations for Skydivers Over Sixty (SOS) and Jumpers Over Seventy (JOS).